

TOWARDS AN ASIAN HERMENEUTICS

L. Legrand, MEP

This article draws our attention to two fundamental dimensions of biblical hermeneutics, namely, commitment to the poor and conversion to an Indian world vision. Rightly, Professor L. Legrand raises urgent and important questions in the context of dalits and tribals. The author invites our attention to different Asian zones having diverse religious concentration. Dr Legrand points out the important interpretation of the Word of God through textual and visual translations and transmissions. The author reminds the readers that a truly Indian interpretation will emerge as a component of a lively Asian hermeneutic that will bring to the Christian *oikoumene* a contribution proportionate to its global challenges and spiritual resources.

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission released a document on "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church."¹ Taking into account the recent developments in Biblical scholarship, it amounted to a concise but competent treatise of exegetical and hermeneutic methodology. It acknowledges the abiding validity of the historico-critical method (1717-1728) but recognizes its shortcomings (1729-1734) and surveys the new approaches which have supplemented or even superseded it. Rhetorical, narratological (1736-1749) and canonical criticism (1758-1763), sociological, anthropological and even psychoanalytical approaches are succinctly but precisely summarized (1775-1789). The liberationist and feminist approaches are cautiously acknowledged (1791-1808). While traditional hermeneutics based on Literal, Spiritual and Fuller sense are recalled (1830-1848), acknowledgment is made of "usefulness" of modern hermeneutics, with explicit reference to Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Ricoeur (1819-1829). In short the document constitutes a learned and valuable survey that could be taken as a text book in a post-graduate course on Biblical methodology.

However, for all its scholarly thoroughness, its horizon remains typically Western. But for a cursory reference to Latin America, Africa and Asia in connection with Liberation Theology (1971), the Document does not refer to any Asian or African line of Bible interpretation.

Looking at it from our Asian perspective this omission is certainly regrettable. However the blame for this omission need not be put entirely on the Biblical Commission scholars. If Asian biblical hermeneutics escaped the attention of the learned Roman body, it is due to the lack of international visibility of any specific Asian approach to the Scriptures. Unlike Latin America, Asia has not yet produced an alternative hermeneutical model, distinct from the Western reading of the Scriptures, that could attract the attention of the outside world.

I. A Vision

The most articulate and competent advocate of Indian Biblical Hermeneutics is the late George M. Soares Prabhu, S.J., who sadly died in 1995 in a road accident, just at the time when, having become emeritus, he was about to devote himself to the elaboration of a synthesis. In an undated and previously unpublished essay which fortunately the editors of his *Collected Works* could retrieve and publish, he gives us a kind of road map of what an Indian Hermeneutics could be.² It should emerge from a *commitment to the poor* and a *conversion to an Indian world vision*. This vision should show four characteristics. It would be *inclusive*, respectful of "other peoples and their religious beliefs."³ It should be *cosmocentric* and "encompass the whole cosmos rather than focussing on humankind alone."⁴ This cosmic empathy would lead to a *symbolic world-view* "sensitive to the evocative power of the text" whether in tune with the classical Hindu *dhvaani* method of interpretation or not.⁵ Finally, and may be mostly, it would be *pragmatic*, leading "to a transformation of the interpreter and his world."⁶

The conclusion of Soares-Prabhu is that "it is the measure of the alienation of the Christian community in India from its roots that... examples of such an obvious way of reading the Bible in India should be so hard to find." ⁷

II. A Challenge

With Liberation Theology and its corresponding approach to the Bible, Latin Americans have been able to propose an alternative hermeneutic model. However the comparison made by Soares Prabhu with the Asian situation may be somewhat unfair. For Asian theologians and exegetes, the challenge is much greater than it was for their colleagues of the antipodes. Actually South American Liberation Theology and exegesis are not totally disconnected from the Western perspective. To some extent, they are an extension of the sociological approach which developed since 1970 or so and which already, according to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, could be suspected to "pay more attention to the economic and institutional aspects of human life than to its personal and religious dimensions."⁸ Pastorally, its sources could be found in the Church praxis and a theology which led to the perspectives of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II on the Church in the Modern World. Moreover, Liberation Theologians in Latin America found themselves in a situation of *tabula rasa* in which a savage form of colonialism had annihilated the cultures, religions and the very identity of the local populations.

This is not the case in Asia. Asian religions and cultures are very much alive. In spite of the various forms of challenge thrown by economic and cultural globalisation, or possibly on account of it, they are even livelier than ever. Their Scriptures, whether Hindu or Buddhist or the Koran, arouse a revived interest. Their myths continue to stir the masses. The recent controversy on the Ram Sethu, or Adam's Bridge, reveals the deep attachment to the foundational myths. So do the revived popular appeal of festivals, pilgrimages and the blossoming of new Temples, big and small, in great cities and small villages. Recently in Myanmar, the silent and

non-violent revolt of Buddhist monks was about to bring down a military government backed by its mighty armies.

In fact, never since the Patristic period has the Gospel found itself facing so lively cultural and religious convictions, traditions and structures. The challenge is even much greater since, in the days of Origen and Augustine, the over extended Greco-Roman world had begun to undergo a cultural-religious implosion while undergoing outside the onslaught of Barbarian invasions and infiltrations. Moreover, with a population reckoned at 100 million at the beginning of the third century,⁹ the Roman Empire counted hardly one tenth of the population of present-day India, not to speak of China and the other teeming masses of the rest of Asia.

Actually the huge Asian continent presents such a baffling diversity that it seems preposterous to speak of "Asian" hermeneutics. India itself presents the kaleidoscopic variety of a multiplicity of religions entering in various forms of iridescence with Sanskrit, Dravidian and Tribal cultures in urban and rural areas. The Islam of Western Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia belongs as much to the culturo-religious Asian landscape as the Hindu and Buddhist spheres of South Asia and the Confucian and Shinto areas of the East. Apart from a geographical label, there is hardly anything that would join them together as a common partner in a hermeneutic quest.

These various Asian settings have at least the common features of being at the same time both poor and rich. Like South America, a large part of the Asian population is left out of the economic progress and continues to live in dire poverty. But at the same time, it is the heir to an invaluable cultural, artistic, literary and spiritual inheritance. The Asian and Indian hermeneutic quest must take these two aspects into account. It moves along two lines which were already discerned and analyzed in the Foreword of C. Duraisingh to the publication of a 1975 Pune Seminar on *India's Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John*.¹⁰ They correspond to the two main aspects of Asian life: richness and

poverty, richness of an age old, yet still lively cultural patrimony, poverty of too many victims of unjust social, economic and political structures. In short, liberation and dialogue, Asian hermeneutics must be responsive to both sides of the picture.

Asian theology, if there can be such a thing, and more specifically Indian theology and the associated biblical exegesis, has entered a vast, multifaceted and theologically unexplored territory. They are in the vanguard of what is one of the main forms, if not the main form, of present day challenge to the creativity of the Word in the power of the Spirit. Latin American theology had only to face a socio-economic desolate setting. Asian theology develops within a rich cultural and religious legacy at the same time as it meets an equally dismal background of poverty. And this background of poverty is compounded in India by the devastating caste structure which is itself intermingled with the anthropological and religious system. A complex situation indeed.

"The task of the exegete in India is therefore a challenging and an inspiring one," said Soares-Prabhu who concluded by quoting James Cone, a Black American theologian: "I left the Asian Theological Conference with the realization that Asian theology represents one of the most distinctive and creative theologies on the world scene."¹¹ We should not be surprised that an adequate systematic model has not yet appeared. It took twelve centuries for the West to produce the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas. The fact that anyway it soon fell behind the times with the advent of the modern ages, invites us not to be too sanguine about well defined systems. What matters is to get started and to move on.

III. Moving on

In this context it would be presumptuous to propose a predetermined well structured model. It would be hazardous even to outline a well defined road map. One can only get on the way, edge forward or stride along. It will be done by meeting the biblical text with *our own questions* and with *our own methods*.

1. Our Own Questions

It has been already quite some time since Bultmann explained that there cannot be exegesis without presupposition.¹² When Western academic exegesis claims to be "objective," it falls all the more a victim of its pre-comprehensions since it is unaware of them. To give just an example, my attention was attracted, a few years back, to a surprising aspect of St Paul's apostolate. Paul is called "the Apostle of the Nations;" he is considered as "the" Apostle, the great missionary of the early Church. However when we look at a map of his ministry, we see that he turned his steps Westwards, towards Europe without having at any time set his sights on Africa and Asia. Why this one-sided orientation of his efforts? Alexandria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Libya in the South, Babylon, Seleucia, Mesopotamia, Persia and even India in the East were well known to the ancient world, and quite present to the mental horizon of the Jewish and Mediterranean people.¹³ The question is significant. It has repercussions not only on exegesis and the history of the Early Church but also on missiology, ecclesiology and even on the question of the Canon in so far as the accepted canon seems to be heavily loaded on favour of Paul and his disciples, Luke, Titus and Timothy. Yet this matter does not seem to have impressed Western commentators. They seem to presume that, since Paul went to Europe, he went to the whole world. One has to live in Asia to look at the map of the early Christian missions from that angle and raise the problem. One has to live in the West to overlook it.

This is only an example. As regards *liberationist exegesis*, in the undated article quoted above, Soares-Prabhu complained that "a large number of 'liberation' interpretations of biblical passages respond indeed to Indian needs but are guided by values that are more Latin American than Indian."¹⁴ But we have now a lively development specific to India in a Dalit theology and exegesis.¹⁵ Special mention must be made also of an emerging "Tribal exegesis."¹⁶ An Indian feminist exegesis has also begun to take shape, only that it should safeguard its originality without just

copying the American Agenda. The scope of Liberation Theology and exegesis has been extended to the ecological concerns. It was the topic of the 1992 15th Annual Conference of the Society for Biblical Studies.¹⁷ The cosmocentric vision suggested by Soares-Prabhu¹⁸ should provide specific Indian dimensions to an Indian ecological hermeneutic.

While surveying the field of contextual exegesis, we should not overlook the dialogue coming from the Hindu partners in dialogue. Their contribution is far from being insignificant though not sufficiently taken into account in our Indian hermeneutic enterprise. It will suffice to evoke the names of Rammohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda and of course Mahatma Gandhi. There also we would find the double orientation of liberation (Rammohan Roy, Gandhi) and dialogue (Radhakrishnan, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda).¹⁹

2. Our Own Methods

Indian culture is made of Scripture and Interpretation, of *Sruti* and *Smṛti*, of Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads. And so is it in Buddhism with *Tipikatta*, *Buddhadatta* and *Buddhaghosa* and even in Islam with *Quran*, *Sunna* and *Hadith*. Asian biblical exegesis is not only the heir to twenty-five centuries of Jewish and Christian hermeneutics, but it belongs also to a long tradition of creative interpretation of religious foundational texts.

In India, the practice and theory of interpretation, and even its philosophy, have been particularly analyzed in depth in the *dhvani* system. On certain aspects it presents an interesting convergence with the Western shift from a diachronic to a synchronic approach to the text. Western "New Hermeneutics" shuns the reduction of the text to an object that can be dismantled and takes language as a living reality inviting us to enter its dynamism and creative impact. The Indian *dhvani* may go deeper than its recent Western counterpart in that it goes to the ontological roots of linguistics.²⁰ Its analysis has even a wider span than that the philosophy of

Heidegger and Ricoeur. It embraces the whole field of human communication, from phonetics to grammar, rhetorics, and linguistics, digging more and more deeply into the nature of communication and of language, finally to reach the ineffable nature of the *atma* or *purusa*. Says Bhartrhari: "The beginningless and endless Brahman is the word-principle, which is imperishable; from the same evolves the world of meaningful objects, as a splendid creation" (*Vakyapadiya* 1:1). As F.X. D'Sa puts it:

the theory of *dhvani*, it seems to me, can be explained only when we presuppose that the whole world is an expression of the Inexpressible, the visible form of the Invisible and the time-table of the Eternal. The Inexpressible, the Invisible and the Eternal are not invented by *dhvani*. *Dhvani* helps to discover them.²¹

These are highly flown speculations. But there is a simpler and more basic point at which an Asian hermeneutic, conducted in our own way, is called for. It is the issue of *language*. Most of our reflection on Indian hermeneutics and application of it is conducted in English. It is thereby cut off from the life of the common people. The originality of the liberative reading of the Bible as carried out in Latin America consisted in that it stemmed from shared experience at the grass root level. It has been a hermeneutic which emerged from lived experience at the basis. It aimed at giving the Scriptures back to the people of God versus the Western tendency to make them the preserve of well funded – and mostly unconcerned – academic circles. In Asia, this restitution of the Bible to the people can only be done in their own languages. Asian hermeneutics must follow the same way. As long as it is left to the language of the elite, it will not be a true living interpretation.

The laity is craving for the Bible. In India Bible copies are sold by millions in the different languages of the country.²² In fact the very fact of translation constitutes a basic, difficult and momentous hermeneutic event.²³ To this should be added the audio and video cassettes relating to the Bible and the visual renderings of the biblical message through films, plays and playlets. Given the

importance of dance in the Indian culture, special mention should be made of the visual "translation" offered through dances, equally popular in both its classical and popular forms. People respond enthusiastically to the various forms of Bible classes, correspondence courses, conventions, and seminars offered at various levels. The charismatic movement gives its members a taste for the Bible. Bible prayer groups and Basic Christian Communities follow the *Lectio Divina* method or other ways of individual or collective Bible meditations. Tools for serious Bible study are produced in local languages. To speak only of South India, sets of Bible commentaries, Bible Dictionaries and biblical reviews are published in Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu. Gospel synopses can be found in Malayalam and Tamil. There is a Tamil version of Rowleys' Bible Atlas and even a Pilgrim's guide to the Holy Land. Other parts of India have their own biblical tools and correspondence courses. There is even a Hebrew-Khasi and Greek-Khasi dictionary.

This lively biblical movement in local languages must be taken seriously. Theological and hermeneutic research in English must restore the contact with this down to earth dynamism if it is not to remain an artificial construct, irrelevant to the true life of India and Asia.

Conclusion

At one of the first meetings of the Indian *Society for Biblical Studies*, way back in the sixties, the question was raised whether there was to be a specifically Indian exegesis. At that time, the almost unanimous answer was that there was no more ground for an Indian exegesis than for Indian mathematics, physics or chemistry: science was universal and so should biblical science be. Today the unanimous answer would be the opposite. Actually the question is no longer asked; so obvious it has become that exegesis is necessarily conditioned by the context in which it works and has to assume this setting. Indian Biblicists are quite aware of the need for a Scripture interpretation in dialogue with other Scriptures, their

contents and methodology and in touch with the country's massive socio-economic and ecological problems.

The prophetic voice of Soares-Prabhu called for a commitment and a conversion, a commitment to the poor and a conversion to an Indian world view. The growing awareness of the need for a truly Indian interpretation marks the beginning of the needed conversion. May it develop into a model or models of hermeneutics. The commitment to the poor is often spoken of or written about. May it be a reality in deed. Then a truly Indian interpretation will emerge as a component of a lively Asian hermeneutic that will bring to the Christian *oikoumene* a contribution proportionate to its global challenges and spiritual resources.

Notes

¹The Document can be found in D.J. Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church*, Revised and enlarged edition, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2007, pp. 689-778. We follow the numbering of paragraphs given in that edition.

²"Commitment and Conversion," in F.X. D'Sa, ed., *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective: Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, vol. 4, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2001, pp. 24-52. Since the bibliography is anterior to 1982, we can presume that the paper would have been written round about that time.

³Ibid., p. 37.

⁴Ibid., pp 37-38.

⁵Ibid., pp 38-39.

⁶Ibid., pp 39-40.

⁷Ibid., p. 46. If Soares-Prabhu had written to-day, his assessment of the Indian exegetical landscape might have been less pessimistic. Valuable publications have come out and interesting work is done in post-graduate programmes in our Indian Theology Faculties by way of MTh Theses or Doctoral dissertations.

⁸*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 1780.

⁹According to M.P. Nilsson, *Imperial Rome*, New York: Schocken Books, 1962, p. 337.

¹⁰C. Duraisingh and C. Hargreaves, ed., Delhi: SPCK, 1975.

¹¹G. Soares-Prabhu, "The Historical-Critical Method," in Scaria Kuthirakkattel, ed., *A Biblical Theology for India. Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, vol. 2, Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999, 35-36. The quotation of J.H. Cone is from D. Preman Niles and T.K. Thomas, ed., *Varieties of Witness*, Singapore: Christian Conferences of Asia, 1980, p. 82.

¹²"Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, London: Fontana, 1960, 342-351. German original in *TZ* 13, 1957, 409-417, reprinted in *Glauben und Verstehen* 3, Tübingen: Mohr, 1965, pp. 142-150.

¹³I have treated the question in an Uppsala Conference published in Tord Fornberg (ed.) *Bible, Hermeneutics, Mission*, Uppsala: Swedish Institute for Missionary Research, 1995, 21-83, further developed in *L'Apôtre des Nations? Paul et la Stratégie Missionnaire des Églises Apostoliques* (LD 184), Paris: Cerf, 2001.

¹⁴*Collected Writings*, vol 4, p. 46.

¹⁵M.R. Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit: Liberation Theology by Victims of Untouchability, An Indian Version of Apartheid*, Hyderabad: Volunteer Centre, 1996; id. "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible," in *IndThSt* 33 (1996) 249-259; R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1969; W. Madtha, "Dalit Theology: Voice of the Oppressed," *Journal of Dharma*, 16 (1991) 74-92; T. Manninezath, ed., "Dalit Theology: Liberation Theology for India's Scheduled Caste," *Journal of Dharma* 16 (1991) 5-92; J. Massey, ed., *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Re-reading the Text, the History and the Literature*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1994; Aravind P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul, 1991; *Towards a Common Dalit Theology*. Madras: Gurukul: 1991.

¹⁶Cf. the special issue of *Jeevadhara* 24/140, March 1994 edited by George M. Soares-Prabhu, on "Tribal Values in the Bible."

¹⁷Papers published in *Bible Bhashyam*, Sept. 1993. For an abundant bibliography on the topic see V.J. John, *The Ecological Vision of Jesus: Nature in the Parables of Mark*, Thiruvalla/ Bangalore: Christava Sahitya Samithy/ Board of Theological Text Book Programme of South Asia, 2002, 372-408.

¹⁸Cf. note 4 above.

¹⁹See the survey of M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1970. More recently, see the special issue of *Jeevadhara* 29/171, May 1999 on "The Hindu Reception of Christ." Resuming the Tradition of Veeramamunivar (Fr Constantin Beschi, S.J.) and of his *Thembavani*, a Hindu Tamil Poet Kannadasan, with the help of

Christian exegetes, has written the *Yesu Kaviam* ("Jesus' Poem") in 9000 verses (432 pages) which, published in 1982 by Kalai Kaveri, Tiruchirapalli, has now gone into 6 editions and more than 3,00,000 copies.

²⁰On the *Dhvani* interpretation of the Bible, cf. the special issue of *Bible Bhashyam* V/4, 1979; T. Manickam, "Cross Cultural Hermeneutics: The Patterns of Jaimini, Bhartrhari and Sankaracharya," *IndThSt* 21/3-4, 1983, 250-267; id. "Biblical Hermeneutics: An Indian Approach," in A. Thottakara, ed., *Indian Interpretation of the Bible*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 115-132, A. Amaldas, "Dhvani Method of Interpretation and Biblical Hermeneutics," *IndThSt* 31/3, 1994, pp. 199-217.

²¹F.X. D'Sa, "Dhvani as a Method of Interpretation," in *Bible Bhashyam* V/4, 1979, pp. 293-4 quoting in note the parallel text of Rom 1:20.

²²It is difficult to get recent global figures. But by way of example, the recent Interconfessional Tamil Bible first published in 1995 has already gone through 13 reprints for a total circulation of 3,30,000 copies, not counting the copies of the New Testament separately.

²³Cf. L. Legrand, "Translation and Inculturation," in J.J. Puthenpurackal, ed., *Going to the Roots: Festschrift in Honour of Dr K. Luke*, Bangalore: ATC, 2005, pp. 195-208.